



Street, S. (2018). The Colour of Social Realism. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 15(4), 469-490.
<https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2018.0438>

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

License (if available):
CC BY

Link to published version (if available):
[10.3366/jbctv.2018.0438](https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2018.0438)

[Link to publication record in Explore Bristol Research](#)
PDF-document

This is the final published version of the article (version of record). It first appeared online via Edinburgh University Press at <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2018.0438> . Please refer to any applicable terms of use of the publisher.

University of Bristol - Explore Bristol Research

General rights

This document is made available in accordance with publisher policies. Please cite only the published version using the reference above. Full terms of use are available:
<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/red/research-policy/pure/user-guides/ebr-terms/>

The Colour of Social Realism

Sarah Street

Abstract:

During the 1960s Eastmancolor, a relatively cheap, widely available film stock, revolutionised the British film industry's approach to colour. This article discusses the consequences of this major representational and aesthetic shift on social realism, a sub-genre of British cinema primarily associated with black and white cinematography. While colour provided an opportunity for greater realism, critics argued that it distracted audiences with hues considered inappropriate for social commentary. The article examines how a number of notable 1950s and 1960s British colour films navigated entrenched critical positions while deploying colour in distinctive, often innovative ways to reflect their social realist environments and themes. Films examined include *A Kid for Two Farthings* (1955), *Miracle in Soho* (1957), *Sapphire* (1959), *Flame in the Streets* (1961), *Some People* (1962), *The Family Way* (1966) and *Poor Cow* (1967). It is argued that critics' preoccupation with the New Wave cycle of films, 1959–63, has been at the expense of colour films that extended the range of representation, both aesthetically and thematically. Bringing colour more centrally into scholarship about British cinema contributes to revisionist research on social realism that privileges the foregrounding of style and textual aesthetics. In addition, the article shows how analysing films from the perspective of colour encourages relating them to broader chromatic tastes and trends. By the mid-1960s, as culture was generally becoming more chromatically vibrant, film-makers were able to take greater advantage of the colour stocks that enabled them to experiment with realist conventions.

Journal of British Cinema and Television 15.4 (2018): 469–490

DOI: 10.3366/jbctv.2018.0438

© Sarah Street. The online version of this article is published as Open Access under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution Licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>) which permits commercial use, distribution and reproduction provided the original work is cited.
www.eupublishing.com/jbctv

Keywords: British cinema; cinematography; colour; costume; criticism; Eastmancolor; London; New Wave; race; realism; social realism.

During the 1960s, Eastmancolor, a relatively cheap, widely available film stock, revolutionised the British film industry's approach to colour. At the beginning of the decade most films were shot in black and white but by 1969, 99 per cent were in colour. This article discusses the consequences of this major representational and aesthetic shift on social realism, a sub-genre of British cinema primarily associated with black and white cinematography as one of its codes and conventions. The mass introduction of colour did not happen overnight, and there are observable differences in how colour was used at different points and how some genres, such as comedy, took to colour more readily than others. Drawing on Raymond Williams, the arrival of mass colour can be thought of as an emergent style, while at the same time residual attitudes around black and white, realist conventions persisted. While colour provided an opportunity for greater realism, critics were often out of sync, arguing that it produced the opposite effect by distracting audiences with hues considered inappropriate for social commentary. This criticism continued a well-established strand of critical discourse about the impact of colour, while repeating stereotypical approaches to colour meaning. Drawing on a number of key examples, this article focuses on the issues raised by social realist films shot in colour, including the extent to which they extended and/or critiqued the range of representation, and whether a turn towards 'vivid colour' also worked to subvert previous ideologically inflected chromatic thinking.

The strong association between social realist films and black and white cinematography is well-established, almost clichéd, applying to the majority of 1950s 'social problem' films and the 'New Wave' that followed. As Geoff Brown remarks:

Think British realism, and you think inevitably of kitchen sinks, tall chimneys, cobblestones, railway arches, bleak stretches of moor or beach, graffiti-lined council estates, people and landscapes placed in spare and striking juxtaposition. You also tend to think black-and-white: the perfect colour scheme for gloomy skies, smokestacks and poetic melancholy. (2009: 29)

Social realist texts tend to privilege content over style, as Hallam with Marshment note: 'Since the construction of everyday life depends upon an apparent stripping away of artifice, choices about lighting and film stock aim to replicate the appearance of genres closely associated with the everyday and the ordinary' (2000: 108). The

tendency to homogenise the New Wave cycle de-emphasised its stylistic diversity while critics were suspicious of films which strayed beyond 'sociological realism' into more poetic realms. Andrew Higson's critique concentrated on the 'poetic' address of landscapes that were in danger of romanticising industrial Britain while distancing the spectator. Looking back to the persistence of the documentary movement's 'rhetoric of social responsibility, education and instruction', Higson noted how aesthetics and style became problematic unless as expressive of 'an iconography, and *mise-en-scène* as a neutral vehicle for "this content"' (1996: 137). The resulting tension between 'sociological' and 'poetic' realism was a key idea in explaining the visual cartography of the New Wave. Yet, as other critics have pointed out, interpreting the New Wave as a discrete cycle has overlooked questions of stylistic difference between the films, and the extent to which realism itself had diverse strains present in other genres (Taylor 2006: 28; Hutchings 2009: 305; Forrest 2013: 57–9).

While John Hill subscribed to what has become the standard catalogue of New Wave films, he also noted that realism is subject to change and development: 'Realist conventions take place in a kind of dialectic with what has gone before, under-writing their own appeal to be uncovering reality by exposing the artificiality and conventionality of what has passed for reality previously' (1986: 127). While he refers primarily to how the films claimed to be offering 'authentic' commentary on working-class life, the point is a useful one in raising the question of how innovation occurs within realist conventions and how 'artificiality' is generally interpreted with suspicion. For colour this clearly created problems, since, as a technical innovation, it was nevertheless associated with 'artificiality' in relation to a long history of critical discourse that regarded it as 'distracting' or applicable only to film genres associated with spectacle. The equation of realism with black and white is based on the persistence of a particular aesthetic regime that became naturalised in relation to film during the key decades of sound cinema, 1930–50, when the majority of films were black and white and when cinema was the mass entertainment of the twentieth century. This generated a powerful model of aesthetic practice that proved difficult for colour to subvert. As Stanley Cavell observes, the cultural power of black and white to 'dramatise reality' is challenged by colour, in spite of the knowledge that colour is capable of representing the world as we literally see it. His point is that, paradoxically, the colour film-world is a *less* knowable one than that presented within the more familiar conventions of the 'black and white axis of brilliance ... along which our comprehensibility

of personality and event were secured' (1979: 90–1). Consequently, a dominant strand of discussion among film professionals was that the introduction of colour should never be obtrusive and that care should be taken not to depart from the conventions of naturalism.

Revisionist scholarship on British social realism has emphasised questions of visual style; for example, B. F. Taylor (2006: 28) argues that realism is a relative term and David Forrest notes how many pre-existing definitions 'seem to place limits on a full and thorough consideration of its complexion and influence' (2013: 2). The same can be said of colour, whose changeability and variety presented challenges for cinematographers. Guy Green, who shot the interior scenes of the Technicolor melodrama *Blanche Fury* (1948), reflected on how 'separation and colour combinations change within a scene. The dramatic effect tends to disintegrate with movement if it is based on colour composition' (quoted in Huntley 1949: 118). For him, black and white was always a safer option because it enabled the audience to forget to compare how something looked onscreen with their everyday experience, a problem that beset the introduction of many film colour systems. He observed how:

In colour we are showing the audience something with which it is very familiar. Common everyday settings are viewed with a critical eye ... If then, in colour we must be completely naturalistic to convince, we have exchanged what can be an art for what at best is an exact science. (Ibid.: 118)

But Green was writing at a time when Technicolor films were relatively rare and expensive. With the introduction of Eastmancolor, such caution arguably became unnecessary and the creative culture was wide open to experimentation. So how did film-makers respond and did attitudes about colour change as its usage became more widespread?

In the 1950s, colour films were still the exception to the rule and film-makers who experimented with colour in different generic contexts had to tread a tentative path. Even with horror, a genre which adopted Eastmancolor at an early stage with *The Curse of Frankenstein* (1957), there was concern from the censors about the impact of showing blood in colour. An audience survey conducted in 1960 found that colour was considered 'a must' for musicals, adventure and Biblical epics, but that many people preferred black and white for crime and mystery films (Leeks 1960: 10–11). In terms of contemporary dramas, using colour to enhance exterior environments was perhaps a relatively safe arena for experimentation while subscribing to the aesthetic conventions of realist photography. *A Kid for Two Farthings* (1955) and

Miracle in Soho (1957), for example, attempted to infuse their exterior settings with the authenticity of colour, respectively London's East End markets and the streets of Soho. These were both depicted as cosmopolitan locales within London, and were shot on location and in studios. While they are more magical-realist than hard-hitting social realist films, their vibrant, multicultural settings invested them with a quasi-documentary imperative to deliver 'authenticity' at a time when colour was still a relative novelty.

Colour glosses the locations of *A Kid for Two Farthings* with a cosmopolitan aura, bringing out the exoticism and plentitude of the market stalls with an emphasis on play and public entertainment. Heightened colour underscores the film's gentle premise about magic within the city, namely that the kid goat of the film's title is actually a unicorn. Based on a novel by Wolf Mankowitz, the film follows a young boy's belief that the goat he has purchased has magical powers to bring everyone good fortune. Carol Reed's choice to use Eastmancolor was to some extent generically determined, and the balance of fantasy elements over gritty realism for him tipped the balance: 'A tragedy or drama might well be photographed so against [the East End's] crowded streets, its war-damaged buildings and its grimy arches. A fantasy such as Wolf Mankowitz's delightful book needs colour' (quoted in Brunsdon 2007: 175). The boy's wanderings through the markets nevertheless permit an extended opportunity for the area's visually rich, chromatically varied features to be showcased. Newly available consumer goods are shown for sale in close proximity to the market's traditional wares and bright neon signage indicates the incursion of American culture. As Charlotte Brunsdon notes, the film shows 'an East End on the cusp of modernity' as a 'sensuous, vital world in which consumption is recognised as a significant social motor, with the role of women's desires in transforming traditional culture explicitly recognised' (ibid.: 176).

Colour enhances the presentation of vivid-patterned fabrics and dresses (playfully dubbed by the salesman 'Yiddish Dior') which are integral to the consumer choices of Sonia (Diana Dors), who dreams of a brand-new pink-and-black bathroom suite and a modern furnished bedroom. The film uses colour as expressive of multiculturalism, abundance, aspiration, youth and adventure as the stallholders talk about Africa as a land of riches and plentitude. But critics were perplexed by the film's aesthetic design, as exemplified by Derek Hill's review which described the colour as 'muddled' and 'disappointing ... Petticoat Lane is seen through rose coloured spectacles ... but the pale pink that is used will not do. This shilly-shallying between

something akin to neo-realism and a half-hearted artificiality is the film's undoing' (1955: 16). Familiar criticisms followed about colour being inappropriate as an effective means of depicting 'the real', as shown in the review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin*, which declared that 'the colour is too harsh and artificial making the locations too often look like rather indifferent sets' (Anon. 1955: 84).

Such views made other directors wary of taking risks and caution over colour continued to prevail. *Miracle in Soho* features a cross-cultural romance between Michael Morgan (John Gregson), an itinerant road labourer, and Julia Gozzi (Belinda Lee), the daughter of Italian immigrants. Their relationship ends when the roadworks in Soho are completed and Michael moves away, but the 'miracle' of the film's title inserts a magical-realist ending as Julia's prayers appear to be answered when a burst water main heralds his return. Like *A Kid for Two Farthings*, the film's emphasis on a socially vibrant local environment and romance had potential for using colour expressively, but in this case the desire to remain within established codes for photographing realist environments outweighed any temptation towards chromatic experimentation. Chris Challis's cinematography was designed to convey a gritty, realist palette that was supported by art director Carmen Dillon's 'restrained' vision. She was careful to avoid criticism by reining in any temptation to make the colour look obtrusive: 'We decided that all the colours should be as muted as possible, with no strong blacks, whites or primaries. The only patch of sky to be seen was through a narrow alley' (1957: ix).

It is somewhat ironic that when colour was used for a more explicitly vivid purpose, it exemplified prevailing stereotypes about race, as in *Sapphire* (1959) and *Flame in the Streets* (1961). In *Sapphire*, a police investigation into the death of a student reveals a complex web of attitudes towards her background as a mixed-race woman. At first drawing conclusions from her 'sensible' brown and tweedy outer clothing, the police assume the body is that of a white woman. But they are puzzled to discover a red taffeta petticoat, among her belongings (see Figure 1), and after meeting her brother they learn of her mixed-race heritage as the murder investigation proceeds. The film's overall sensibility indeed makes for uncomfortable viewing, as Raymond Durnat remarked: 'The tone about miscegenation struck me as distinctly sinister rather than sympathetic' (2011: 76). While *Sapphire* was made as a liberal response to the injustice of racial prejudice as Lynda Nead's recent analysis demonstrates, this film was nevertheless 'undermined by its dependence on a simplistic notion of racial difference, drawn through the visual discourses of colour,

race and dress. The grey world of the racist white population is contrasted to the colour world of the black immigrant population' (2017: 374–5). The film's colour scheme was designed to reflect a juxtaposition between the drab, sombre winter tones accented by lighting cameraman Harry Waxman for London locations, and the gaudier hues for clothes worn by black characters, as well as for 'Tulip's', a club they frequent. As director Basil Dearden commented: 'My idea is to throw all this into contrast with the sudden splashes of colour introduced by the coloured people themselves. The things they wear, the things they carry, their whole personalities' (quoted in Edwards 1958).

The red taffeta petticoat that reveals the secret of its dead owner's black identity while 'passing' for white as a music student in London made an unquestioned connection between colour, sexuality and racial identity. While this point has been made by a number of theorists, Nead's analysis goes further by discussing the complexity of dress codes and colour choices in this period of colonial migration (Hill 1985: 34–49; Tarr 1985: 50–65). Nead argues that immigrants' signs of sartorial respectability and status were

turned, in the hands of journalists and academics, into signs of alien strangeness and unpredictable sexuality. How the 'lovely red coat' became a taffeta petticoat and the terrible secret of Sapphire's black identity. The first step in this process was to interpret the crisp dresses, pretty cardigans and sharp suits as visual signs of cultural outsidersness. (2017: 380)

These attitudes were part of a wider cultural understanding of colour, as institutionalised by the British Colour Council and numerous other organisations. So, while the film was unusual in its foregrounding of vibrant colour, it did so as a means of explicating its limited, social-realist message rather than inviting the audience to question the assumptions about colour upon which it was based.

Appearing two years later, *Flame in the Streets* shares a similar imperative to deliver a white, liberal message about the 'problem' of race relations. The film has not been analysed as extensively as *Sapphire*, yet from the perspective of colour it is arguably less closed as a text. This is partly due to its dual focus on the issue of race: as a trade union matter when a black worker is up for election to the position of foreman in a factory and as a site of family conflict when the white trade union leader's daughter wants to marry a teacher who has recently emigrated from Jamaica. The drama turns on the contradiction between 'public' and 'private' attitudes which expose controversial opinions. While the union leader, Jacko Palmer (John Mills), is vehemently opposed to racial prejudice at work, his daughter

Kathie's (Sylvia Syms) situation is less clear-cut, especially when his wife expresses her total opposition to the liaison. Unlike *Sapphire*, the film shows inter-racial couples: Kathie and Peter Lincoln (Johnny Sekka) and Judy and Gabriel Gomez (Ann Lynn and Earl Cameron). Gomez is the worker who is elected as foreman, following a heated debate in which Jacko gives an impassioned speech that persuades the union members to vote for him. The function of these two couples is to expose the prejudices they experience and to convey the strength and confidence they need in order to survive.

Flame in the Streets shows racial discrimination as cutting across class and generation. While David Robinson in the *Financial Times*, 23 June 1961, thought its message well-intended but 'contrived', James Breen in the *Observer*, 25 June, admired its 'trenchant social comments' and Dilys Powell in the same day's *Sunday Times* welcomed its 'refusal to bundle the story up in an all-round happy ending'. Colour features in a similar way to *Sapphire*, in that otherness is associated with chromatic vibrancy, particularly in the case of costume. The Jamaican men working at the factory are frequently seen wearing plaid shirts with distinctive bars and stripes of colour. Interestingly, and perhaps to underscore their status as an inter-racial couple, Peter and Kathie's costume, however, subverts this stereotype. Peter's more professional status as a supply teacher is indicated by his beige coat, white shirt and neutral tie, while Kathie is presented as 'different' in terms of her attitude to race but also in terms of her chromatically distinctive attire, for example her purple, maroon and mauve coat worn with a patterned white and mauve silk headscarf when she is out walking with Peter.

Colour is also important for coding the film's urban landscape as muted and de-saturated, as in a key sequence when the couple experience a utopian moment in which their dream of being together seems possible. As they walk by the canal – a bleak landscape, drained of colour – Peter tells Kathie about Montego Bay, describing it as 'sweet' with 'water, blue like the sky' (see Figure 2). Their isolation from other people in this sequence similarly sets them apart from a landscape to which they do not seem to belong. This is different from 'That Long Shot of Our Town from That Hill' discussed by Andrew Higson as an evocation of poetic realism in New Wave films, since the canal is positioned as the opposite to a distant land which is *felt* rather than seen. Montego Bay comes alive for the characters through poetic description and imagination: Kathie closes her eyes and says she can *see* Montego Bay, as if to do so she must – literally – block out the bleak canal from sight. They look up to the sky which could not be more

different from what has been described, locating Jamaica as a place with plenty of sun, even if its lack of employment has drawn people to emigrate. The contrast with London is repeated elsewhere in the film, similarly expressed in sensuous terms as a difference of temperature, light, colour and warmth; as one character wryly remarks: 'The weather in this land of sunshine is turning my blood to ice.' There is a sense of hopelessness in that London is depicted as unsuited to the immigrants, as a strange place where they can never fit in. As Nell says despairingly: 'I wish there was somewhere in this world where Gabe and me had a right to be happy.'

Colour as evocative of sensation is used for a very different effect in the film's penultimate sequence. The fragility of the local community is further exposed when violence breaks out at a Guy Fawkes' Night bonfire. Gabriel is badly burned when trying to rescue a man whose car has been set alight with him inside, following a fight with local thugs. The orange, flickering flames and white, sizzling sparklers are first accompanied by shots of excited children, happily enjoying the spectacle in a spirit of inter-racial harmony. When the white gang targets the immigrants this mood changes to fear and horror in a scene that the critic of the *Daily Herald*, 23 June 1961, found too 'contrived, gratuitous and basically irrelevant'. Colour was used as a means of dramatising sequences involving fire in silent cinema and also in Technicolor. Its function in *Flame in the Streets* is similarly to bring out the 'added value' provided by colour in terms of filming this spectacle. Eastmancolor captures the shock of seeing a safe, physically contained fire suddenly burn out of control and become threatening. It also serves as a reminder of how the meaning of colours can swiftly change according to context: when depicting fire, orange and red connote warmth and life but also destruction and death. In terms of the film's narrative closure, the bonfire leaves a similar trace of ambiguity. The violence provides a dramatic climax to the film's contemplative, closing scene when back in the house, Kathie, Peter and her parents face each other across the room. The space between them symbolises the difficulties that lie ahead, as the implication that they will make their situation work is undercut by their recent experience of explosive racial violence at the bonfire.

The 'social problem' elements of *Sapphire* and *Flame in the Streets* qualified them to be discussed in relation to realism, but they are not generally considered to belong to the New Wave cycle, 1959–63. Following the release of *Billy Liar* (1963), the first film to indicate that the cycle had run its course was Tony Richardson's colour adaptation

of the novel *Tom Jones* (1963). He later reflected that it was difficult to make the shift from filming primarily in black and white:

It gave me a chance to use colour, and colour film was becoming much faster and more sensitive. There had been a lot of prejudice against colour, which I, to my shame, had shared—we had all thought it to be too crude and brash. There had been a lot of talk about ‘taste’ again, today, to my shame. In fact this snobbery still exists, and many people—inspired by their passion—still imagine that there is something intrinsically subtler, better, more artistic about black and white. (1993: 126)

The historical/costume drama genre of *Tom Jones* was deemed to be appropriate for colour, with its emphasis on establishing period authenticity and verisimilitude. The lack of confidence about using colour for contemporary social realist drama and the neatness of conceptualising the New Wave in terms of black and white aesthetics meant that less visible, but nonetheless significant, films were overlooked by contemporary critics and then later by academics. A striking case of this is *Some People* (1962), a social problem film shot in Eastmancolor that broke the mould in many respects.

Set in Bristol, *Some People* was ostensibly about the work of the then new Duke of Edinburgh’s Award Scheme in giving bored, restless teenagers constructive activities. But as many reviewers noted, it defied expectations of this didactic function by being full of energy, with ‘good music, fast action, and effortlessly good playing. And it is photographed in fine suffuse colour against the splendid sights and slums of Bristol’, as the *Express* film critic put it on 18 July 1962. Its director, Clive Donner, came from a background in film editing before working as a contract director with the Rank Organisation and then as an independent. In the early 1960s he worked for the J. Walter Thompson advertising agency and made commercials for television, an influence which shows in *Some People*, particularly its punchy opening montage accompanied by a blousy jazz theme (see Figure 3). This shows neon signs flashing ‘Bristol’, followed by a succession of hoardings advertising food, jewellery, motorbikes and hire purchase schemes, and then shop window displays full of consumer products. The sight of Bristol’s green buses provides a humorous variation on the shiny red buses typically used as shorthand iconography for ‘Landmark London’. This visual assault is full of colour interest, announcing the film’s general tone of openness to stylistic experimentation, wit and energy. Nicolas Roeg (uncredited) worked on the film’s second unit, an interesting choice in view of his subsequent distinction in colour film-making.



Fig. 1. Sapphire (1959): 'red taffeta under tweed'.



Fig. 2. Flame in the Streets (1961): Sylvia Syms and Johnny Sekka.



Fig. 3. *Some People* (1962).



Fig. 4. *Poor Cow* (1967): Carol White and Terence Stamp.

Victor Perkins interviewed Donner for *Movie* in 1962 and discussed the decision to shoot the film in Eastmancolor. Donner explained: 'It was partly done for the entertainment value, but also because to me the convention that reality is better in black and white is just a convention, and there's no reason why we shouldn't adopt another

one' (1962: 23). Perkins was normally very critical of British films, but he found *Some People* to be exceptional, describing it as 'the most intelligent, honest and enjoyable picture from a British director since Seth Holt's *Nowhere to Go* . . . It has a less self-conscious, and therefore more genuine, freedom than any of the films of the so-called British new wave' (ibid.). As well as the fresh outlook of the director, the film's qualities were attributed to the excellent performances of its young actors, particularly Ray Brooks (Johnnie), David Hemmings (Bert), David Andrews (Bill), Angela Douglas (Terry) and Annika Wills (Anne), all in early roles. Kenneth More plays Mr Smith, an enlightened volunteer choirmaster who allows them to practise as a pop group in the church hall after they have been banned from riding their motorbikes. Without being overtly propagandist, the Award scheme is mentioned a few times in the film. The group become engaged in its activities, except for Bill, who eventually drops out from the scheme. As Perkins noted, the issue of combating juvenile delinquency never seems heavy-handed: 'The scheme is only important to the movie in so far as it affects and illuminates the relationships of the characters' (ibid.).

Colour enhances the impact of *Some People*, from the brash, bright, primary colours of the advertisements in the opening sequence to the yellow, white and red decor of the El Toro coffee bar frequented by Johnnie and his friends. The emphasis is on a city in transition, represented by the incursion of neon signs and magazines with glossy front covers for sale on Christmas Steps, a local historic landmark constructed in the seventeenth century, and the modernist church the young men enter in search of a piano or organ after being thrown out of a youth club. In an otherwise grey concrete structure, Donner includes overhead shots of the church that create graphic chromatic interest through the sight of red kneelers and blue hymn books appearing like small decorative buttons below. Costume is also used to display different colours, patterns and textures, from the yellow scarf which Johnnie admires himself wearing in the mirror when getting ready to go motorcycling to Terry's close-fitting, yellow/green top and purple skirt worn when she joins the group as a singer. Colour also enhances the film's depiction of the pleasures of consumerism. One sequence shows Johnnie and Anne going shopping. She chooses a selection of outfits to try on, including a paisley-patterned dress, and she buys a pink one which we later see her wearing to go dancing. This scene also highlights colour in long-shots that relish the spectacle of red, yellow and blue coloured lanterns hanging from the ceiling above the packed dance floor. A large screen decorated with red, yellow, blue

and green diamond shapes stretches across the back wall, topped with a crown-like structure adorned with coloured lights. The impression is of funfair fixtures having been relocated as gaudy dancehall decor that is reflective of the transition taking place in popular entertainment. In this way, *Some People* is alive to colour's potential and to the 'added value' it can bring to a contemporary realist drama.

Various critics noted Donner's deployment of a televisual, commercial aesthetic. For example, John Coleman in the *New Statesman*, 27 July 1962, claimed that *Some People* was 'the first British film to have purloined a stance and style from the one-minute commercial'. As noted above, this style was conducive to the colour that was an integral part of advertising theory and practice. Eric Danger's *Using Colour to Sell*, published in 1968, emphasised connections between colour and affluence, youth and modernity. Increased awareness of the impact of colour in the 1960s created an environment that in some sectors promoted experimentation. Danger noted:

The principle feature of modern experience of colour has been the tendency towards brighter colours and to use more colours. This is chiefly due to the influence of the young who have more money to spend than past generations and who are, therefore, able to give rein to their inherent liking for colour and experimentation. (1968: 48)

While the teenagers of *Some People* are not particularly affluent, colour is very much part of their world and is linked to modernity, changing fashions and consumer culture. This continues a similar theme in *A Kid for Two Farthings*, making it to some extent inevitable that in order to be truly realistic, more films would have to be made in colour. But as we have seen, this was still considered a risk, even after the New Wave had run its course and the scope for colour had broadened.

The Family Way (1966) is another notable Eastmancolor film with a contemporary, realist theme that has not received much critical attention, in spite of its success at the box office. Set in Bolton and based on a play by Bill Naughton, the Boulting Brothers' *The Family Way* is a sensitive tale about a young couple, Arthur (Hywel Bennett) and Jenny (Hayley Mills), who live in his parents' house after they get married. The stifling, close-quarters environment seems to prevent them from having sex, and Arthur's subsequent humiliation when his friends and family learn of his impotence provides the situation through which the film explores the couple's relationships with their respective parents, the impact of gossip in a local community and the pressures towards conformity. As in *Some People*, the incursions

of modernity are presented in chromatic contrast to landscapes and interior sets. The film opens with a 360 degree camera pan presenting Bolton as an industrial heartland with dark chimney stacks and terraced houses. The palette for Arthur's parents' house is brown, grey and cream. Colour is consistently used to connote sexuality, escapism and leisure. For example, Jenny looks into the window of a travel agent's shop in anticipation of the 'Moonlight Special' honeymoon they have planned (but which turns out to be a swindle when the agent makes off with everyone's money). The advertisements show drawings of vivid blue seas and skies, golden beaches and palm trees, much as the then unusual holidays abroad were indeed advertised. The red roses Arthur gives Jenny on their wedding day contrast starkly with the muted tones of their bedroom. Jenny removes them before they turn in on their wedding night, saying that flowers don't survive in bedrooms, their removal symbolising the elusive passion they cannot experience while lodging with their in-laws. When Jenny and Arthur go dancing, a large kaleidoscope of coloured lights throws a succession of primary hues on them in a spectacular diegetic chromatic effect. Although realist in design (dance halls in the 1960s typically used this type of lighting), the set also symbolises an alternative, freer space for the couple away from the house that appears to repress them quite literally.

Colour is used as an impressionistic effect in two striking instances. Arthur is painfully reminded of his problem when he sees a bus with an advertisement on its side for 'Sex in Marriage' that appears to be back lit so it stands out almost luminously. This is how he sees it, the image graphically expressing how his predicament invades his consciousness. But perhaps the most distinctive and interesting use of impressionistic colour is when Lucy (Marjorie Rhodes), Arthur's mother, recalls her husband's best friend Billy, a man with whom they both appear to have been in love. Arthur and Jenny's 'problem' occasions some heated discussions among their respective parents and provokes uncomfortable recollections of the past for Lucy and her husband Ezra (John Mills). Ezra's friend Billy went on their honeymoon and was a frequent visitor in the early days of their marriage. Ezra talks of Billy passionately, remembering walks with him as the best moments of his life, with the insinuation that he was indeed in love. Although this appears to annoy Lucy, it seems that she too had great affection for Billy. She tells Jenny's mother that one day when Ezra was working late, Billy helped her with decorating the house. She is shot in medium close-up for this recollection, sitting on the sofa, with the room's muted, beige and brown colours seen

in the background. Her eyes appear animated as she fondly recalls herself at nineteen, when we gather (but are not told explicitly) that she and Billy inadvertently had sex, leading us to conclude that he might be Arthur's father. As she speaks, the background becomes infused with blue/violet in a chromatic effect that is visually expressive of her romantic memory. Such an effect is unusual in films with otherwise largely realist *mises-en-scène*. It is consistent with the film's other instances of using brighter hues to indicate sexuality and freedom, while contributing an impressionistic, nostalgic gloss to this trope. In this way, another contemporary realist drama is assisted by colour to convey the significance of place, space and subjective affect. While not supplanting realist iconography or themes, *The Family Way* shows occasional inventiveness with colour as a means of extending its stylistic range.

Samantha Lay observes that after the New Wave, social realism became associated with black and white television rather than film (2002: 65). This shift would appear to reinforce the sub-genre's established aesthetic conventions, even though the socially conscious content of television dramas such as Ken Loach's *Up the Junction* (BBC, 1965) and *Cathy Come Home* (BBC, 1966) was ground-breaking. John Caughie notes that *Up the Junction* was also stylistically innovative, linking its 'montage of sound and image' to modernist traditions (2000: 119–20). Such formal experimentation with realist conventions created a space for a similar development in film, especially since a number of directors worked in both media. By the mid-1960s, when Loach was presented with the opportunity to make a film for cinema release, colour stock was generally preferred for commercial reasons. Faster stocks and more portable cameras encouraged this trend as the number of British colour films produced doubled between 1963 and 1966. The resulting project, *Poor Cow* (1967), was shot in Eastmancolor by cinematographer Brian Probyn. While Loach is reported to have not been keen on using colour because of its tendency to make images 'pretty', the film is arguably a good test case to gauge whether doing so extended the range of representational codes associated with realism (Hill 2011: 108). He expressed the dilemma directly in an interview in the *Morning Star*, 24 March 1968: 'With colour, if you're not careful, you can end up with "nice" shots of slums and drab surroundings, which look attractive but make an entirely different pictorial comment to the one you intend.' The film was perhaps suitable for experimentation because of its unusual source in Nell Dunn's episodic, impressionistic novel about Joy (Carol White), a young working-class woman living in the East End of London. In addition, I want to argue that *Poor Cow*'s

chromatic sensibility contributed greatly to its verisimilitude, communicating a sensuous experience of the look and feel of the mid-1960s.

Opening with what was considered to be a shocking sequence of Joy giving birth to her son Jonny, colour is obtrusive in the film from the start. Margaret Hinxman in the *Sunday Telegraph*, 7 December 1967, complained that this scene was in bad taste, all the more so because of Eastmancolor:

The birth is an actual one in glorious Eastman Colour. Like all births, except those with which you're personally concerned, it's a messy sight. It isn't dramatic, or informative, or vital to the story and no woman I know, whether she's had children of her own or not, particularly wants to watch the process.

But it serves as a vivid jolt, a reminder that this film will be different in its approach to realism. The film follows Joy's relationships, first with her husband Tom (John Bindon) and then with Dave (Terence Stamp) after Tom is jailed. When Dave is also imprisoned, Joy has several fleeting encounters with various men before returning to Dave when he is released from prison. We see Joy in many different moods and circumstances, enjoying time with Jonny, a placid, happy child, it seems, with red hair and reddish cheeks, with her friends, visiting the seaside, working as a barmaid, going on a photo shoot with her friend Beryl (Kate Williams) and with Dave on a holiday in Wales. As John Hill points out, the film's plotline is 'loose and episodic', with life taking a fairly arbitrary course (2011: 105–6). This permits a varied approach to colour, which plays a large part in underscoring Joy's environment, observations and introspection.

Colour is effective in depicting the film's various locales. Aspirational living is connoted through colour and decor at the beginning of the film when Joy and Tom move from London to Ruislip, a West London suburb where a large number of council houses had been built since 1945. A high-angle shot introduces the area's rows of terraced houses, neat gardens and parks. Joy's voice-over tells us that 'the world was our oyster' and we see them in a bright, modern flat with a television. A café frequented by Joy, Tom and his criminal associates is painted in purple and orange, colours associated with 1960s interior decoration when the trend for a 'feature wall' and/or a door in a colour such as purple was in vogue. After Tom is jailed, Joy moves back to London, at first staying with her aunt, where we see her boiling her son's nappies in a large tin pan and living in very grimy conditions. The locale is shot in the realist tradition, emphasising a

grey/brown palette to highlight the squalid conditions in London's tenements prior to their being knocked down at the end of the decade in a programme of urban regeneration, with their damp walls, peeling wallpaper and tin baths. Yet some critics were still dissatisfied, stating that 'realism is not helped by colour, which in England always seems to prettify even the most sordid settings' (Davies 1967–8: 43). Yet elements of prettification were used subtly, to indicate how even with very little money people made their surroundings 'home'. When Joy and Dave move into a similarly run-down flat she says she could make it 'really nice' with chintz, floral curtains and white paint. Her happiness with Dave is reflected in how they make small changes by adding new curtains and wallpaper. As with Nell Dunn's novel, Joy's viewpoint is always at the centre of the film, colouring much of what we see and hear about her life. From this perspective, colour's aesthetic function is not to negate the impact of poverty and struggle. Rather, it signifies the temporalities of material life in the 1960s, encompassing both the old and the new. Colour's potential materially and psychologically to transform lives is also drawn attention to, representing Joy's stoical attempts to improve the physical environment in which she lives.

Colour is obtrusive in the sequences when Joy and Dave go to Wales and when Joy takes her son to the seaside. Raymond Durgnat thought the scene when Joy and Dave kiss in front of a waterfall in Wales was similar to 'an advert for menthol cigarettes' (see Figure 4), but perhaps with an ironic function as an impression of Joy 'seeing the country through commercial-conditioned eyes' (quoted in Hill 2011: 108). The countryside is indeed depicted as picturesque, almost clichéd, with fresh water streams running through verdant green hills populated with creamy-white sheep. The waterfall provides a sublime backdrop to Joy and Dave's kiss, accompanied by a lazy, trumpet soundtrack. The way the scene is filmed, as if indeed they are advertising the perfect life, evokes Joy's memory of the trip as she romanticises her time with Dave. Joy's voice-over narration of letters she is writing to Dave while he is in prison provides a commentary on the images, constituting a 'psychologising' impulse which, as Hill notes, is somewhat in tension with the objective imperatives of sociological documentary (ibid.: 109). On the other hand, the vivid colour of these scenes could be said to function as social satire, as a critique of the advertising aesthetic mentioned by Durgnat and that featured in films such as *Nothing But the Best* (1964). In this respect colour is used self-reflexively as an ironic comment on one of its contemporary commercial usages.

The sequence shot at Bognor Regis, West Sussex, is enhanced by the colours, sights and sounds associated with British seaside resorts

including ice creams, shiny slot-machines, golden sand, snatches of pop songs and red dodgems at the funfair. But the use of colour here has a very different feel from the sequence in *Wales*, once again demonstrating how colour performs many varied functions in *Poor Cow*. Joy and Jonny sit in a photo booth that churns out successive black and white smiling images of them on their day out—a small incident, yet one which draws attention to the rest of the film's colour and what it adds to the photogenic qualities of Joy with her blonde hair and fair complexion. A little girl who has befriended Jonny reads him a story about 'pretty colours' in another poignantly fleeting moment. The filming is both lyrical and descriptive, documentary in its way while also providing a contemplative interlude for Joy as she fears Tom's impending release from prison. In this way, the subtle slippage in and out of Joy's subjectivity permits the audience to recognise the familiar chromatic sensations of 'the seaside'.

In terms of costume, *Poor Cow* uses colour to create subtle character points or to indicate the vicissitudes of Joy's life. Tom is portrayed as stolid, possessive, patriarchal and often violent in comparison to Dave, who is depicted as more loving and caring for Joy and Jonny. To reflect this difference sartorially, Tom is seen wearing dull, beige shirts and dark ties, almost formal in his attire as a professional criminal. On the other hand, the first time we see Dave he is wearing a green shirt and is later seen in blue or mauve casual clothes, or just in his jeans at home. This detracts attention away from his criminal life, the full extent of which is known only when he is sentenced in court. While these are small details, they nevertheless add to a chromatically rich palette. When Joy gets a job as a barmaid, she dresses as if on show, with her hair up and wearing a low cut, tight-fitting mauve/purple dress that attracts the attention of male customers. Her unashamed liking for male company and enjoyment at being admired while still being in control promotes an assertive representation of female sexuality. The photo shoot scene in which Joy and Beryl pose in pale, fluffy negligees and then less and less clothing is filmed with a touch of irony. This exposes the photographers' lascivious attitudes while at the same time capturing the women's self-awareness at 'playing' being models. The difference between the clothes and colours selected for the photo shoot and what the women choose to wear draws attention to how the meaning of colours, fabrics and costumes changes according to context.

In conclusion, the conventions of social realism on screen have been primarily identified with black and white, or monochrome, cinematography. This aesthetic is seen as appropriate to convey the

essence of sociological inquiry, to place 'serious' content over the style and effervescent 'artifice' associated with colour. This supports the classic tradition codified as *disegno e colore* in which lines and shades carry greater intellectual weight than the decorative colours associated with femininity, surface and distraction. When assessing the changes that took place in the 1960s it is important, however, to note that representational regimes are seldom independent of each other. The greater availability of colour forced a dialogue between established realist conventions and the new possibilities opened up by colour. As we have seen, critics were particularly resistant to change, unsure how to evaluate colour and frequently condemning it as inappropriate for realism or, as in the case of the opening of *Poor Cow*, complaining that colour made a scene too realistic for comfort. But colour is relational, and since black, grey and white are also colours, they are just as capable of acquiring new meaning as, say, red or purple. So, rather than see black and white and colour as oppositional, it is perhaps more useful to think of the 1960s as a period of chromatic experimentation as a number of drivers broadened the available 'axis of brilliance'.

The primary drivers were technical, economic and social. As David Batchelor has noted, for many years in photographs and films, grey had to stand in for every other colour (2014: 73). Guy Green said that the cameraman had 'an infinite number of shades from black to white at his disposal' so 'he can blend an appearance of reality into whatever dramatic effect he is seeking. In fact this result should be better than reality' (quoted in Huntley 1949: 117–18). This acknowledgement of the artifice behind monochrome cinematography exposes the aesthetic construction of realism itself, thus making it as amenable to experimentation as any other convention. So, to return to my earlier questions: how and when did innovation occur within the sub-genre of social realism and what role did colour play?

When colour became a realistic option as stocks became faster, cameras more lightweight and a number of professionals trained in television and commercials turned to film-making, the number of available shades became even more infinite. At first, realist films that showed experimentation with colour tended to be generic hybrids, such as *A Kid for Two Farthings*, a film whose magical-realist sensibility was conducive to colour. Established aesthetic tastes were challenged by the all-pervasiveness of colour advertising as consumerist cultures projected a world of affordable goods, fashions and tastes. If film-makers were to document changing times and the advance of 'modernity', they surely had to do this in colour. Films such as *Some People* and *The Family Way* showed how this could be done within

a broadly realist remit, conveying the changing social landscape of Britain's cities while experimenting with colour in distinctive ways. But colour could still be confusing, and as we have seen, certain directors relied on simplistic, stereotypical conventions to depict race as a social problem, as in *Sapphire* and *Flame in the Streets*.

Even though it was made only four years after the declared end of the New Wave, Ken Loach's *Poor Cow* is a world away from that particular regime of realist representation. As critical responses show, a number of writers still occupied residual territory concerning aesthetic judgement, while others saw that the film was genuinely doing something new with both realism and colour. Some of this experimentation continued with the film adaptation of Nell Dunn's *Up the Junction* stories, directed by Peter Collinson in 1968. But somewhat ironically, it was black and white television that provided an imperative for artistic innovation with realism, demonstrating again the productivity of seeing the development of such conventions as a continuum rather than a clear rupture between monochrome and colour. There were of course many other drivers making for a more chromatically varied culture in the 1960s: the colour supplements of the Sunday newspapers, psychedelia, pop music, pop art, neon lighting and acrylic paints. Social realist films continued, and continue, to develop, from Mike Leigh's ground-breaking films of the 1970s to the work of Michael Winterbottom, Lynne Ramsay and Andrea Arnold. The role of colour continues to be part of realism's evolution as digital aesthetics again force the pace of innovation within what is perhaps a more fractured, hybridised 'continuum of signifying conventions operating across a wide range of production practices' (Hallam with Marshment 2000: 100).

Funding

This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (grant number AH/N009444/1) and constitutes part of 'The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955–85', a research project based at the Universities of Bristol and East Anglia.

References

- Anon. (K. R.) (1955), 'A Kid for Two Farthings', *Monthly Film Bulletin*, June, pp. 83–4.
Batchelor, D. (2014), *The Luminous and the Grey*, London: Reaktion Books.
Brown, G. (2009), 'Paradise found and lost: the course of British realism', in R. Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, 3rd edn, London: British Film Institute, pp. 28–38.
Brunsdon, C. (2007), *London in Cinema: The Cinematic City since 1945*, London: British Film Institute.
Caughey, J. (2000), *Television Drama: Realism, Modernism, and British Culture*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Cavell, S. (1979), *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Danger, E. P. (1968), *Using Colour to Sell*, London: Gower Press.
- Davies, B. (1967–8), 'Poor Cow', *Sight and Sound*, Winter, p. 43.
- Dillon, C. (1957), quoted in 'Building Soho at Pinewood', *Kinematograph Weekly*, Studio Review, 28 March, p. ix
- Dunn, N. (1967), *Poor Cow*, London: MacGibbon & Kee.
- Durnat, R. (2011), *A Mirror for England: British Movies from Austerity to Affluence*, London: BFI/Palgrave Macmillan.
- Edwards, B. (1958), 'Reality and colour is Dearden's aim', *Kinematograph Weekly*, 25 December, p. 15.
- Forrest, D. (2013), *Social Realism: Art, Nationhood and Politics*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Hallam, J. with Marshment, M. (2000), *Realism and Popular Cinema*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Higson, A. (1996), 'Space, place, spectacle: landscape and townscape in the "kitchen sink" film', in A. Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, London: Cassell.
- Hill, J. (1985), 'The British "social problem" film: *Violent Playground* and *Sapphire*', *Screen* 26: 1, pp. 34–49.
- Hill, J. (1986), *Sex, Class and Realism: British Cinema, 1956–63*, London: British Film Institute.
- Hill, J. (2011), *Ken Loach: The Politics of Film and Television*, London: British Film Institute/Palgrave Macmillan.
- Huntley, J. (1949), *British Technicolor Films*, London: Skelton Robinson.
- Hutchings, P. (2009), 'Beyond the New Wave: realism in British cinema, 1959–63', in R. Murphy (ed.), *The British Cinema Book*, London: British Film Institute, 3rd edn, pp. 304–12.
- Lay, S. (2002), *British Social Realism: From Documentary to Brit Grit*, London: Wallflower Press.
- Leeks, R. A. (1960), 'Colour films draw better, British survey of preferences indicates', *International Projectionist*, 35: 1, January.
- Nead, L. (2017), '"Red taffeta under tweed": the colour of post-war clothes', *Fashion Theory: The Journal of Dress, Body and Culture*, 21: 4, pp. 365–89.
- Perkins, V. (1962), 'Clive Donner and *Some People*', *Movie*, 3, October, pp. 23–5.
- Richardson, T. (1993), *Long Distance Runner: An Autobiography*, London: Faber & Faber.
- Tarr, C. (1985), '*Sapphire*, *Darling* and the boundaries of permitted pleasure', *Screen*, 26: 1, pp. 50–65.
- Taylor, B. F. (2006), *The British New Wave: A Certain Tendency?* Manchester: Manchester University Press.

Sarah Street is Professor of Film at the University of Bristol. Her latest books are *Colour Films in Britain: The Negotiation of Innovation, 1900–55* (2012) and (co-edited with Simon Brown and Liz Watkins), *Color and the Moving Image: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Archive* (2012) and *British Colour Cinema: Practices and Theories* (2013). She is Principal Investigator on *The Eastmancolor Revolution and British Cinema, 1955–85*, an AHRC-funded project.

Your short guide to the EUP Journals
Blog <http://euppublishingblog.com/>

***A forum for discussions relating to
[Edinburgh University Press Journals](#)***



EDINBURGH
University Press

1. The primary goal of the EUP Journals Blog

To aid discovery of authors, articles, research, multimedia and reviews published in Journals, and as a consequence contribute to increasing traffic, usage and citations of journal content.

2. Audience

Blog posts are written for an educated, popular and academic audience within EUP Journals' publishing fields.

3. Content criteria - your ideas for posts

We prioritize posts that will feature highly in search rankings, that are shareable and that will drive readers to your article on the EUP site.

4. Word count, style, and formatting

- Flexible length, however typical posts range 70-600 words.
- Related images and media files are encouraged.
- No heavy restrictions to the style or format of the post, but it should best reflect the content and topic discussed.

5. Linking policy

- Links to external blogs and websites that are related to the author, subject matter and to EUP publishing fields are encouraged, e.g. to related blog posts

6. Submit your post

Submit to ruth.allison@eup.ed.ac.uk

If you'd like to be a regular contributor, then we can set you up as an author so you can create, edit, publish, and delete your *own* posts, as well as upload files and images.

7. Republishing/repurposing

Posts may be re-used and re-purposed on other websites and blogs, but a minimum 2 week waiting period is suggested, and an acknowledgement and link to the original post on the EUP blog is requested.

8. Items to accompany post

- A short biography (ideally 25 words or less, but up to 40 words)
- A photo/headshot image of the author(s) if possible.
- Any relevant, thematic images or accompanying media (podcasts, video, graphics and photographs), provided copyright and permission to republish has been obtained.
- Files should be high resolution and a maximum of 1GB
- Permitted file types: *jpg, jpeg, png, gif, pdf, doc, ppt, odt, pptx, docx, pps, ppsx, xls, xlsx, key, mp3, m4a, wav, ogg, zip, ogv, mp4, m4v, mov, wmv, avi, mpg, 3gp, 3g2*.